



Nat:

Welcome back to Reach. Teach. Talk. We are running a series of mini podcasts with various leaders in educational technology, and today I'm pleased to bring on as a guest Mr. Hamish Mackenzie from the UK. He has been a 10 year teacher ... 10 years, not tenured, but 10 year teacher ... and he also works with schools all around England and helping to promote digital literacy among the faculty and in their school communities.

Nat:

Currently, Hamish is the director of technology as well at Royal Hospital School for years 11 through 17, and we're going to talk about how this sudden change to remote learning and remote teaching does not necessarily mean giving up what you've built in terms of your relationships in the classroom. It does not mean that the trust is at risk or the connection is weaker or this feeling of hope has been challenged.

Nat:

It has been challenged, but it doesn't mean that it is hopeless. And in fact, in this conversation, there will be some hope-filled examples that Hamish will be sharing with us to help those of us who are adjusting to this new world of teaching. And it's been such a whiplash kind of speed in which this has happened. In fact, in the UK, today is the first day of the two people or less stipulation from Parliament saying we are housebound here. We are not able to leave the house except for just to run groceries.

Nat:

So Hamish is giving up his time and also sharing his housebound existence with us today as many of the viewers and listeners are also sharing in this housebound existence in these unusual times. So Hamish, I just want to say without much further ado, welcome, and I'm so happy that you've taken the time to meet with us on Reach. Teach. Talk.

Hamish Mackenzie:

I'm really happy to be here, and I've been a big fan of listening to your podcast for the last few months. And we were sad that you couldn't come and talk to our staff recently, but we've all been affected by this coronavirus, and it's great to continue the conversation over the web and share our experiences and try to give a little bit of analysis of the current situation, which is unprecedented in every way.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And we're seeing kind of tectonic plates shift in terms of society and economy, and no more so than in education. So it's great to be here, and I'm really looking forward to sharing some of our experiences and learning from you as well.

Nat:

Hamish, just to reiterate, your background is certainly as a technology expert and a helper, an instructor, a mentor, and somebody who's really, really worked with teachers on a one-to-one interface and in

groups in helping them make this transition, not just in these current times, but as I said before, in your career for years. And maybe we can just start from there.

Nat:

In terms of the teachers listening and watching today, what can be some words of hope from you in terms of, "I suddenly have to make this shift, and how do I do this in a way that doesn't lose the human nature, the relational nature in my classroom?"

Hamish Mackenzie:

Sure. So I think I'd probably start with what I always say to staff at the start term when we do our address, which is that the most important people in the room are the teachers. As a school, we invest heavily in technology. We've been iPad one-to-one for quite a long time. We've gone full cloud with 365, and personally, I train people on all kinds of different platforms.

Hamish Mackenzie:

But the debate is often about the technology. And really, I always lead out with saying it's about the teachers. The most valuable people in the room are those teachers. Everything else in the school supports those teacher people student relationships, and whatever we can do to make those deeper, more meaningful, more impactful. And essentially, that is the core of what schools do and what educators do.

Hamish Mackenzie:

But in my mind, technology is a fantastic enabler of those relationships. And clearly, whilst none of us would want to be in the situation at the moment of a UK lockdown or schools having to close their gates ... They are very strange places, schools, when they've got no children in them ... this is where we are. And so we have to innovate; we have to adapt; and we have to leverage some of the tools we've got available to maintain human relationships and to maintain that connection with our students who, I would argue, need us now more than ever.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And there are so many great ways of doing this. We can talk about different platforms and different tools and pedagogies, but ultimately, it's about those children, knowing that there's people who care for them on the other end of the line, that those staff feel supported in innovating and trying out new things.

Nat:

What can you say to teachers who are saying, "Oh, but what if I make a mistake?" or "What if my students judge me?" How much give do these students tend to have, the adolescents?

Hamish Mackenzie:

I think that's a really great point. So we've been planning a lot for the last, well, certainly three weeks, but particularly in the last week about how we can make the environment as comfortable as possible for staff to innovate. And one of that is by getting an agreement from all the children to say that whatever goes on, a online lesson will not be published or re-published anywhere.

Hamish Mackenzie:

We have a digital license approach where for students to access our curriculum, they have to pass a digital license. And essentially, it's just a multi-choice set of questions, but it shows our expectations of them online, and it mirrors the kind of behaviors we would expect offline. But we essentially put an appendix on that, which was just a little Microsoft form, which said, "We're going to really try and keep

this school going, but we need you to know that there's going to be no republishing of this stuff. No screenshots. No sharing, because otherwise, it's just going to increase the anxiety of everyone," both those students putting their hands up in the class and the teachers trying to innovate and getting it wrong.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And our students are fantastic. They all came straight back and said, "Yes," and what's been really encouraging has been actually, sometimes those sparky characters who can be a little challenging to control in lessons have been brilliant online. And you're hearing meaningful conversations, respectful conversations, listening to the teacher, supporting the teacher when they can't upload things. I can sit in on some of the lessons remotely.

Hamish Mackenzie:

It's one of the things I do. And it's just great because you can chirp in and go, "Can you just help upload that?" And someone will say, "Well, I'll do it." And they'll literally step through the steps talking to the teacher about how to upload a particular image or whiteboard resource or something like that. And it's just brilliant. You start to get that class vibe back that you might have in a classroom, but you're seeing it in an online space.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So I think to answer your point, the students have been absolutely fantastic. Admittedly, we're only on day two, and one of the things we did was that we taught remotely for three days of last week. So even though we had the students in front of us, we would teach them remote lessons so that if there was a problem, one of them could get up and come and sit next to the member of staff and come and help them, or they could call me or one of my colleagues, and we could come down and support them with a workflow.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And it also meant we could do all the troubleshooting beforehand so that we knew the system was going to hold when we rolled it out this week. We were just praying that Microsoft had enough resource behind it so that the servicing is all over, but they haven't, and it's so far so good. The students have been great. I think if you put your trust in them; if they see that you're human; if they see that, yes, you're getting things wrong, but you're trying, and you're giving it a go, and you haven't washed your hands with them, they're going to give you so much rope. And they're going to be appreciative and supportive of everything you're trying to do for them.

Nat:

There's something about the level of empathy being heightened, perhaps, because I mean, all the students understand the teachers are out of their element as well. And ironically, the teachers are dipping into their world in a sense, not that it's 100 percent and zero percent, but this is the world that these digital natives have grown up in now.

Nat:

And the teachers who may or may not be digital natives are dipping into that world. And I appreciate very much hearing this optimistic kind of view that you're sharing about the student resilience and the student acceptance of teachers who may be less than perfect as they get their sea legs, and also, the importance of schools like yours that have been able to take some training days beforehand and just being able to walk through with their tech staff and just the collegial help and support that has been well-established.

Nat:

I'm thinking, Hamish, about the fact that we are about two-thirds of the way into the academic school year and this idea emulating the classroom in a remote way. You were talking earlier kind of a school contract kind of thing with students. We will not screenshot; we will not record. But obviously, that was not part of the deal in the beginning of school, in the real classroom, the brick and mortar classroom. So have you seen any kind of tools or strategies that teachers have been able to use to sustain the ethos of their specific classroom in this remote atmosphere?

Hamish Mackenzie:

So I think there's a few things there. We've designed our program around five core pedagogies, so we've looked at what are the core things that teachers need to do remotely, or methodologies that they rely on day in, day out in their classrooms, how can we allow them to still happen? Because if we can allow them to still happen, we'll maintain the ethos, and it won't become something entirely new.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So we were looking at, first thing is this relationship idea. So you can have video, audio, text-based communication. The students can talk to teachers; teachers can talk to students; and we can both talk to the group. That's quite important. Whiteboard work is a really important piece. We could call it chalk and talk, but it's still an important pedagogy, the fact that people are writing on the board and that they're talking over top of it.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So we use a Microsoft Whiteboard app for that and the styluses and the iPad, and that's working really nicely with screen casting. We've got resource sharing, so we want staff to be able to share PowerPoints, Google Slides, whatever methodology they want to do it. We're currently in a Microsoft environment, but you can just as easily do this in a Google environment. So we wanted them to be able to share their resources and also talk over them. It's no good just giving them resource as a passive thing. Off you go and do that task for the next two months.

Hamish Mackenzie:

It's about, let's have a look at this slide. What did people think about this graph? What is the relationship between these two things? Can you expand upon that? Can you pick on a student and ask them? So it's actually trying to keep those teaching workflows going, and by doing that, you maintain the ethos, and you maintain the class dynamic. And of course, there's going to be some bubbling, and there's going to be some people making jokes and doing things.

Hamish Mackenzie:

But as teachers, we're used to that, aren't we? And you can manage that dynamic, and actually, that's so much better than putting out there something which is a one way communication because it's a video feed, and that's all you can do, and you're scared that it might end up on YouTube, and you might be ridiculed by your peers or the Twitter community. If you can make it a meaningful two-way dialogue, then actually, I would argue you're really maintaining that community, and you're really maintaining that ethos.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And I think further to that, in a big school ... So we're not that big. We're 750 students ... it's about maintaining the normality, so we're going to run assemblies through Teams. Our management structures are going to run through it so that we can still keep videos going. We can still keep a face-to-face dialogue where we're doing things like recording the sounds of the school, so we have a bell that rings, and we have canteen and stuff like that. So we've got a bit of an audio library that we can drip out

into this so that maybe two weeks down the line when students are feeling like, "Actually, I'm a bit bored of this isolation thing," we can drop in some of those kinds of hints.

Hamish Mackenzie:

"Actually, here's a little bit of school. Here's a bit of this. Here's a bit of that." And we're hoping that that will maintain the ethos and maintain the togetherness. And sometimes it's just silly little ideas that can make people feel connected, like the power of a childhood smell, something like that. It's something that takes you back, doesn't it? So we're working on some kind of creative ideas like that where we can keep the ethos going even though we are two meters isolated from each other.

Nat:

I love that, just the idea of adding the texture of the school, because you were broadening this from the classroom to the school environment as well and for the 750 students and for all the faculty members too who are also kind of school sick ... Not homesick, but school sick ... to hear the chimes and to hear the sounds and all of that is wonderful.

Nat:

There's a head teacher at the school that I'm on the governing board of in Soho in London at a primary school, and she has been basically running morning assembly by herself but videoing it and sharing it. And she's at the school, and she's just sharing it. You just get a sense of how empty a school feels, and you and I were chatting before we hit record about a school feels kind of wonky when there's nobody in there.

Nat:

There's something unusual about a school without its students and faculty. It's a very odd kind of energy, so to share that as a way of saying, "Look at the difference you make just by you, by being part of this community. It's about community over [crosstalk 00:13:26]."

Hamish Mackenzie:

And I think also, I mean, coming back to the kind of wider point, to keep coming back to this kind of human connection, it's about recognizing that the students are more than just what you see in front of you when they're there. And in a classroom, we're quite used to the kind of power dynamic however individual teachers want to run their classrooms, but you suddenly kind of atomize that when it becomes remote.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And you've got these children who still want guidance and still want those connections, but they're completely separate. For example, this morning, I was running a coding lesson remotely, and we were doing some Swift Playgrounds, and the students were going through, and it was lovely seeing their progress. But then I suddenly thought, "You know what? It's this beautiful spring morning here. We've been hit by this isolation, this countrywide kind of [inaudible 00:14:09] that we've all got to stay inside."

Hamish Mackenzie:

And I said, "Look, guys, it's brilliant. Let's just get our iPads up, and let's take a picture out the window. I want you to try and embody spring out the window. We're going to have cameras facing outwards, and we're going to try and connect on what we can see out our windows, and we're going to annotate over the top of it. Tell us the things that you can see, what's in your world, what's going on at the moment."

Hamish Mackenzie:

And it was just incredible. Within about two minutes, we had 24, 25 photos coming back of what they were looking at. What was their world that morning? And the different views out of different windows and how that related to all of the context of that individual was just so interesting. And they were so lovely to each other when they shared them and talked about them. And we can suddenly get the conversation very positive, and we talked about spring and what we're looking forward to and growth.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And we can start commenting on different things. And it was just really, really interesting. And it went from what would have been a traditional lesson where we were progressing through some kind of computing exercises into something which was much deeper and spoke to more than just the teacher student. It was actually much more about the group dynamic and the fact we all realized each of us is going for our own sense of isolation.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So it's those kinds of things where you reset what it means to have a classroom running. And aren't we lucky that we've got the technology that we can do this? And this is not out the reach of anyone [crosstalk 00:15:38] can do it.

Nat:

Actually, as a way of giving an example of atomizing the power dynamic ... Which, by the way, that's a quote that, if you don't mind, I'm going to have to use that in the future. I just think that that is such a great example of what this platform is doing is atomizing the power dynamic ... could you share the story about the 70 year old physics teacher? Because I think it's such a great one.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So we've been planning for this for about three weeks. We didn't think it would come quite as fast as it came in the end, but so we've rolled out Teams, which is a Microsoft platform, and we've been using iPads for that. And we decided to close the school three days early internally by teaching remote lessons with the children in front of us so that if there was a problem, they could put their hand up and they could ask. They could support the teacher in going to do something.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And then we were running surgeries at lunchtime where staff could come and help. And as I say, this senior member of the common room came up and said, "I've done this lesson, Hamish. What do you think of it?" And this, and there she was. She was doing a light refraction experiment. It was being filmed on the iPad. She was talking over the top, and she said she thought she sounded much posher on the recording that she did in real life.

Hamish Mackenzie:

But she was so pleased with herself, and her students were so great in filming it. And it goes to show, if you can do it at 70-years-old at the end of your career when you should probably be thinking about the own risk to your own health with corona, and actually, she's learning. She's in that growth mindset that we talk to our students about. And I think it's such a powerful thing when students see their teachers putting themselves out of their comfort zone and embodying that growth mindset, which we want our children to be in.

Hamish Mackenzie:

We don't want them to be these kind of passive recipients of knowledge. We want them to be thinking, inquisitive, experimenting, trying, getting it wrong, picking themselves back up, having another go at it.

And that's what we're seeing our staff do at the moment, and I just think more power to them. It's fantastic seeing the innovation that can come if you set a structure, a strategy, and just support people and just keep supporting them, although from a two meter distance now.

Nat:

I love that. First of all, that example, that anecdote of the physics teacher is a great one to wrap us up on because it's so hope-filled. And also, this connection to the growth mindset, Hamish, that's huge because I mean, every school now is focused on Carol Dweck's teaching the growth mindset, and for students to watch the teachers grow as well, to give them that permission, is huge.

Nat:

But I'm also thinking about how, with this growth mindset and the way you've just kind of shared in these past 15 minutes about what these online classrooms can provide in terms of connection, in terms of understanding kind of your students on a different level and looking out the window and taking a picture of what you see and describing it, et cetera, a lot of teachers, when I talk with them and when I'm meeting with teacher groups, talk about how siloed they feel in the classroom. And my final question for you, Hamish, is this. Is there any way that you can help teachers to feel less siloed in what they're doing now?

Nat:

In other words, at your school, or do you know of any schools that have really taken into consideration the fact that it's almost like the siloed classrooms compounded? Because it's one thing to know that on either side of you, the walls either side of you, there are other teachers teaching, but it's something very different when you're teaching from home. It's a doubling down of the silo effect. So what advice can you leave us with about how to have us feel less isolated as teachers? Because some great ideas need to be shared, like the 70-year-old physics teacher.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So just doubling back a little bit on that, one of the ways we went about planning for this was to look towards Asia, to look to Hong Kong, to look to those schools which have been facing disruption for three months earlier, partly because the COVID outbreak started in Asia but also because they've had disruption with the riots and all those problems that were going on in Hong Kong.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So we've had lots of learning from them, and one of the things that came back really strong was the well-being of staff is super important. It's much harder to teach a video-based lesson, to do video instruction, than it is to manage a dynamic when the children are in front of you and you can give them the teacher look, or you can do all those kinds of things which you're used to doing in your classroom.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So we've taken advice. We've looked at schools who are a week in front of us, two weeks in front of us, three months in front of us, in terms of their deployment of technology in a remote learning context. And that came across loud and clear, that you need to look after your staff, that they need the equivalent of a staff room where they can come in and get a cup of coffee and say, "Well, that was a bit of a ropey lesson," or, "Wow, that went really well. You should try this," all that kind of buzz that you get in a staff room.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So it's really important to keep those dialogues going. Now there's lots of ways you can do that. You can do this via chat rooms. You can do this via Twitter. I mean, the power of Twitter as a professional learning network is just extraordinary. I really encourage educators to build a professional learning

network to connect with people who are doing similar roles with them worldwide and share ideas and practices. There's just so much great PD you can get from there.

Hamish Mackenzie:

It's amazing, but also things like the Google, the Apple, the [Showbie 00:21:07], the Microsoft learning community is fantastic for magpie-ing ideas and getting little nuggets which can make a big difference and deploying them in your school. So I think those two things, really, partly looking at what other schools are doing and how they've really recognized the need for staff well-being, recognize the need to keep meaningful connections between staff, if that's picking up the phone, if it's doing a Team's meeting or a Zoom meeting as a faculty where you can chime in and you can do things.

Hamish Mackenzie:

There's been a great rise, I don't know if you've seen it, in virtual pubs online. It's really funny, but there's some quite fun education ones going on where the rule is you have to have a drink. It doesn't have to be alcoholic, but you have to have a drink on the go, and you can just talk about your day. And you can say, "Look, this was really tough, or, "The technology here isn't working for me," or, "It is working." And it's a great place to have meaningful conversations.

Hamish Mackenzie:

I've learned so much just certainly from a safeguarding perspective, hearing what's gone wrong or what's gone well in other countries and what things to consider. And as a result of those conversations, we started with all of our video cameras off so the students can see us, but we can't see them. But we know that we've got the ability to turn that on if we decide that in a week's time, in a month's time, we want to have that face-to-face connection a bit more.

Hamish Mackenzie:

We've learned lots about how we can use live captioning so that our foreign students can pick up our voices. We've learned about how to speak slower and more clearly and to plan for less so that we're not trying to get a million things in. Teachers always over-plan, so just draw it back a little bit. Give people some time to actually breathe.

Hamish Mackenzie:

So that's been really good, so learning from that experience, and I think just pushing things Reach. Teach. Talk. podcast, or [PLN 00:22:48] so that you can actually go and find the people doing similar things to you and learn from their experience because human beings are social creatures, all right? We need to talk to people.

Hamish Mackenzie:

We need to interact with people. And if we can't do that physically, let's find those ways of doing it online and connecting. The last one I'll leave you with is we did a little thing just before we closed the doors yesterday to thank our staff for the innovation they've put forward in the last couple of days, and we've done two things. One of them was to give feedback to the whole group.

Hamish Mackenzie:

And it was just great hearing the positivity come back from staff who are learning and growing and having a go at this and saying, "We're going to do this. We're going to do a good job for our staff," so getting that collective team spirit going with staff. And the second thing, which was really nice, a colleague of mine anonymously emailed, polled the student body and said, "Our teachers are all going to miss you. Can you give us your messages back to your teachers?"



Hamish Mackenzie:

And what came back was really, really lovely. It was messages from all different stages of the school. People said, "We really appreciate what they're doing. They're going the extra mile. We want to keep connected. We want to do this," and just little snippets of lessons that they've remembered. It didn't have to be online or offline, so that you can leave staff with this sense of, it's going to be tough in front of us, but look at what you're doing for children.

Hamish Mackenzie:

Look at the connections you're making. Look at how your other staff are in the same position as you. Your colleagues are in the same position as you. We're all going forward. We're going to try, but it makes a difference, so keep doing it. Keep innovating. Keep pushing the boundary.

Nat:

Hamish Mackenzie, this has absolutely been a wonderful conversation in terms of remembering that, as you started off with actually, yes, we can talk about platforms. We can talk about hardware. We can talk about software. We can talk about whether you're using Zoom or Skype or whatever, but really, this is all about the spirit of teaching, and it's all about preserving and maintaining the relationships with teacher to student, and also as we've wrapped up in this conversation, from colleague to colleague and administrator to colleague.

Nat:

And anyhow, your stories, your spirit, is absolutely inspiring. And I'm so grateful for your time, seven hours across. I'm drinking my morning coffee, and you're settling in for maybe your online happy hour, your online pub shortly.

Hamish Mackenzie:

I've got to go and top up.

Nat:

You got to top up, exactly. Thank you very, very much, Hamish.

Hamish Mackenzie:

[inaudible 00:25:12] Thanks for all you're doing. It's great. I really enjoy your podcast.

Nat:

Thank you very, very much. Looking forward to having this out there for the world to benefit from your wisdom. Thank you.